

Two Poets of the Peasantry

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He was no japer', to find laughter in such
things. He has
little use indeed for laughter in general:
Papers and iang-
lers' for him are 'Judas' chyldren'.

Has his vast poem then no heroes, no
praise, no sym-
pathies? Yes; but these all belong to the
humblest upon
earth:

Souteres (cobblers) and shepherdes • suchc lewed
lottes (humble
creatures)

Percen with *apater-noster* • die paleys of hevene.
Amid all his wanderings and maunderings,
his preachings
and prosings, the courage of his pity for
the poor, for
'the wo of these women that wonyeth (dwell)
in cotes
(cottages)', stands out to do this strange
writer honour
and lend him flashes of passionate eloquence:

Lo! briddes and bestes • that no blisse ne knoweth
(that know no
happiness),

And wilde wormes in wodes • thorw wyntres thow
hem grevest,

And makest hem welnyegh meke • and mylde for
defaute (through
privation),

And after thow sendest hem somer * that is her
(their) sovereigne
loye,

And blisse to alle that ben • bothe wilde and tame.

Shall the poor, then, never have their turn?

After all, even

Angels that in helle now ben • hadden loye some
tyme.

And again:

Pore peple, thi prisoneres • lorde, in the put (pit) of
myschief,

Conforte tho creatures * that moche care soffren
Thorw derth, thorw drouth • all her (their) dayes
here,

Wo in wynter tymes • for wantyng of domes,
And in somer tyme selde • soupen to the folk;
Comforte thi careful • Cryst, in thi ryche
(kingdom),

For how thou confortest all creatures * clerkes
bereth witnessc.

Five years before the first version of the

poem appeared
in 1362, the villeins of France, maddened at
length past
bearing by having the Hundred Years' War
fought upon
their trampled carcasses, rose to inflict on
their oppressors
cruelties even more fiendish than they had
endured. They